



THE CRADLE OF HELL

by WILLIAM E. BARRETT

At the mercy of those taunting Boche guns, Fogarty learned that there can be a worse end than death. Only when Death's substitute pointed her hand at him did he know the terrific cost of his ransom.

THE WAR WAS A GIANT CHESSBOARD upon which unseen gods played a relentless and uncompromising game. On March 17, 1917, the red hand of Destiny moved two figures out upon the board and with them ushered in the bloodiest interval of aerial warfare. On those two pawns the guns of April were tuned.

Beyond the mine craters of Pozieres where the Forty-second Squadron, R.F.C. was quartered, Captain Jim Fogarty, a Montana Irishman in the service of Britain, swaggered jauntily to his warming Nieuport. Youth and Glory and Success walked with Fogarty; the twin Ds of Death and Defeat had not touched him. He was Youth triumphant, a veteran of six weeks on the fighting Front, commander of a squadron, and officially credited with victories over sixteen enemy airmen. His gray eyes swept the sullen skies in which the pink pennants of the dawn were slowly unfurling. His white teeth flashed against the black tan of his face.

"St. Patrick's day in the morning," he said. "Could a man named Fogarty choose a better day to fight?"

Beyond the grim Bois d'Havincourt, old "Mossy Face", Count Otto von Sternberg was also walking to a warming ship. He did not walk jauntily as did Fogarty and his eyes did not sparkle. There was, however, in his tread the firmness of a conqueror, in his eyes the cold light of confidence. He, too, was a veteran and he commanded a squadron. Three of his lieutenants matched strides with him and he addressed them as he pulled on his heavy gloves.

"This Fogarty," he said, "is as good a fighter as the British can claim. It will be a fair test." His eyes moved appraisingly over the black finish of the shiny new plane that awaited him.

"After this combat I will give you a full report on the relative merits of this new ship and the Nieuport. I will test it fully."

One of the lieutenants chuckled.

“This Englisher thinks that you challenged him to avenge a comrade?”

Von Sternberg’s heavy features were illumined for a moment by a slow smile.

“He will think that,” he said, “because his name is Fogarty. His is a sentimental race. I care nothing for those who fly no more. I am concerned with those who will live to fly this ship.” He waved to the black plane. “The word of engineers is nothing. I will tell you about it when I return.”

The ship to which he pointed stood proudly on the line awaiting his touch; the throbbing Mercedes engine on its nose imparted to it a quiver as of eagerness. This was the Albatross D-3, grim herald of Bloody April. First of its breed to reach the Front, this particular ship was assigned to Count Otto von Sternberg. He slipped into the cockpit, palmed the throttle and roared off to the gray sky.

The hand of Destiny reached across the board, hovered over Pozieres and swooped down. Fogarty was climbing into the cockpit of his Nieuport.

Steve Donlin pressed Fogarty’s hand as the lean Irishman slid in behind the stick; Steve had enlisted with Fogarty in Canada and had gone the whole way with him.

“Good luck, old boy. Get back in time for breakfast.”

Fogarty grinned. “Righto!”

Greg Mallock, Commander of B Flight, pressed forward. He didn’t offer his hand, but his lips twisted into the semblance of a smile. In a world that Fogarty built, Mallock would not have happened. There had been no love between the men since the moment they met.

“Better be careful, old chap,” he said. “Duelling is against the regulations, y’know. Be a bit of a row if—”

“Ah, don’t be a hangar lawyer.” Fogarty waved to the mechanics, winked at Donlin and set his face for the skies. Of course he was breaking the regulations. The R.F.C. forbade the answering of challenges from German airmen. Right. A darn good rule for men like Mallock and no rule at all for men with names like Fogarty. The mechanics whisked the chocks away and the rotary roared. He was off.

THERE was a song in Fogarty’s heart as he plunged through the curling wisps of gray that hovered over the greatest battlefield of the war. Croiselles slipped under his wings, and Queant and Bouchavesnes.

Distant flashes, evenly spaced, told of the siege at Baupaume. To his left lay the dark mass that squadron messes knew as Mossy Face, hunting ground of Boelcke and Immelman and of those who followed them under the Imperial Eagle.

Fogarty’s pulse quickened as he discerned a tiny, distant speck in the sky. One ship was flying alone out of the east. One ship meant that the time for action had come. Von Sternberg had been in earnest. The man wanted to fight.

Fogarty warmed his guns and his eyes kindled. He had been born to battle and the blood of warriors raced in his veins. This was a high moment. At such a time he could not imagine being a Mallock nor even a Donlin. Mallock was a hothouse soldier. They had had to teach him to fight. Donlin was too cautious. Fogarty fought as naturally as he breathed.

Swiftly the two ships closed the gap that had separated them. The German dipped in salute and banked lazily away. Fogarty’s teeth flashed and he returned the salute. There was a puzzled crease on his forehead, however, as he followed the other’s bank and sparred for an opening.

“What’s he flying, I wonder? New one on me.” His trained eyes catalogued the salient points of the Albatross in a glance; whale-shaped fuselage, Nieuport-type interplane struts, shovel-shaped tailplane, engine shielded and streamlined. His mind approved it even as his lips curled in derision of the German flyer’s tactics. The man was circling like a boxer, seemingly adverse to opening the combat. Fogarty felt no fear and he discounted the value of any unproved ship.

“Waiting for me to carry the fight, bucko? Okay! Stop this, will you!”

He was a little above the German and his nose whipped down in a flashing dive that took him straight into his foe. His hand caressed the Vickers trips and the gun bucked as flame spat through the prop. He had never missed at such range and with such an opportunity. But the German was not in the path of that whining death. Without any apparent effort, von Sternberg lifted the black ship and curled upward out of the line of fire in a turning climb that took Fogarty’s breath. He had never seen a maneuver like that and he didn’t want to see it now.

In a screaming rush the German was upon him. Twin Spandaus blazed and Fogarty rolled with the burst, his own gun snarling defiance as he flipped over on his back, a maneuver that gave his foe the shortest possible burst.

Undisturbed, the German took what Fogarty gave; hanging on his prop at the stalling point he sewed a deadly seam along the Nieuport's left wing. Just short of the cockpit, von Sternberg's line of leaden death stopped short and the Albatross flipped over on its back and zoomed back.

Fogarty cursed softly. This was flying such as he had never seen. He had only a split second to avoid that zoom, when he should have had half a minute and tail position. Laying on the rudder, he came around and made a desperate bid for the German's tail.

It was a hopeless play and he realized it even as his nose swept around. The German, however, made no effort to forestall him. As though asleep, the pilot of the black ship hewed to a straight line and let Fogarty come down on him. Fogarty smiled grimly and his big hand dropped to the trips.

"Men die inevitably who fail to protect their tails." It was written thus in the book of the air. Fogarty's Nieuport snaked across the sky and the German awoke.

Disdaining to maneuver, von Sternberg opened his throttle and the deep bass of the Mercedes roared Germany's defiance to the laws of aerial fighters. Like a rocket that blazes across the sky, the Albatross zipped away from danger. Fogarty's body tensed as his tracers spent themselves in the murky sky. Not even with tail position could he touch this ship. It simply walked away from him.

AN ICY breath blew out of eternity and Fogarty felt the chill of it. He no longer deceived himself. A new ship was on the scene and he could not cope with it. He was doomed. Faster, mightily powered and able to do things that he could not even attempt in a Nieuport, the Albatross would make a rookie great. There was no rookie in that other cockpit. Behind those Spandaus sat one of Germany's greatest airmen, the cool campaigner who claimed twenty-one victories, Otto von Sternberg of Bavaria.

Out of the path of flame, the German was once more banking lazily as though mocking Fogarty's best—and worst. If Fogarty knew that he was beaten, von Sternberg was more than sure of his victory. He did not have to make a move. He could let his enemy attack and forestall any maneuver. He knew that he had the greatest ship on the Western Front and he was already writing a report on it in his mind.

Fogarty's white teeth ground against one another, his eyes narrowed and his thumb lifted from the coupe

button. If he could catch that German once in the sights! It made no difference if he died that instant. Just once!

The Nieuport leaped across the gray, a frail thing that matched a pygmy's speed against the stride of a giant. Again the Vickers spat in a long-range, desperate burst. The Albatross flashed upward in an Immelman, the nose dropped off the top of the turn and lead thudded into the fuselage behind the Nieuport pilot's head rest. Fogarty tensed in the cockpit and kicked hard against the rudder as he strove to escape. The other had the tail position now and his was the faster ship.

"Good-by now; a long good-by!" Fogarty shrank from the lead that he expected in his back. The guns behind him ceased to vomit death and he twisted his head.

The Albatross was still riding him and he could see the German's face above the cowling; the hard face was rendered hateful in Fogarty's sight by the faint smile that lightened it. The man could call the second in which Fogarty's life would end, but he was holding his fire, shaming his foe and glorying in the certain knowledge of his superiority.

In that moment Fogarty went mad. Disregarding everything in a wild desire to end the struggle some way, any way, Fogarty nosed down, raced and then flashed the stick back, curling up in half a loop out of which he rolled with marvelous skill. His hand was on the trips but he scarcely hoped for a shot now. At best he could hope only to force the German into ending the struggle or obtaining perhaps, a chance to ram him.

He came out of his renversement with the sky before him and he blinked. There was no sign of von Sternberg.

Fogarty turned frantically and looked back. His tail was clear. As though some mighty hand had reached out and removed him. The German had vanished utterly.

It was uncanny and Fogarty wet his lips. For a few horrible moments he suspected that he was dead and that this was some unreal experience of the borderland, the continuation of sensation beyond existence.

Then, through the steady beat of his rotary, he caught another sound, the deep bass drone of a Mercedes.

He banked desperately and his eyes searched the gray skies. Not a sign of his foe! He looked back with

the look of one who is haunted. His tail was still clear. All that rode with him was the ghost of his foe, the deep droning sound of the big engine.

“Am I mad? Dead? What?” Fogarty passed his hand across his eyes. It was fantastic to believe that the other could become invisible. Many things this new ship could do, as it had demonstrated, but nothing made by man had invisibility. As though the Devil were riding his ship, Fogarty dropped his nose and raced away from madness. The dive was too steep for a Nieuport, but he didn’t care.

ALL trace of the jaunty young pilot who walked with Glory and Triumph had been erased now. The man in the Nieuport cockpit was a nerve-shattered creature, mistrusting his own senses and filled with a great fear; not the fear of death, which is commonplace, but the fear of Fear, which is the greatest of Terrors.

After a thousand feet of wild dive, Fogarty pulled out. Again he turned in the cockpit. Once more his eyes sought desperately. The song of the Mercedes swelled above that of the Le Rhone but the Albatross was not in sight. Then Fogarty knew!

The German was doing what combat instructors sometimes do to cadets, a thing that Fogarty would have deemed impossible on an experienced front-line pilot. The man was practicing concealment. He was riding in the Nieuport’s blind spot, synchronizing his speed and his every movement to that of his foe and demonstrating beyond argument his eternal mastery.

Even as Fogarty came to the realization of the truth, von Sternberg tired of the game. The deep drone of the Mercedes became a roar and the black ship flashed across the sky, whipped gracefully around, and came back toward the Nieuport.

Fogarty set his teeth and rushed to meet his death. Death laughed at him. As elusive as a ghost, the Albatross played around him, toyed with him, coaxed him to charge and left him at will. The sweat oozed from every pore of Fogarty’s skin and his hands shook as he continued to play the desperate, hopeless, reason-destroying game.

He cursed, ranted and shook his fists but the German would neither kill nor allow him a burst. At last, with a derisive wave, von Sternberg turned and headed back toward his own drome.

Fogarty refused to believe that it was over. For several seconds he crouched in the cockpit awaiting the *coup de grace*, then his overstrained nerves broke.

He sobbed with relief in the knowledge that he still lived and, in the same breath, cursed himself because he was alive. Like a drunken man he swayed in the cockpit and mouthed gibberish. The Albatross became a dim speck in the gray of the sky.

Beyond Mossy Face, von Sternberg was circling down to his drome at Boislens. He was almost gay in the knowledge that Germany had such a ship as the Albatross. He saw glory and triumph ahead—and mastery of the sky for the Imperial Eagle. His heart glowed righteously in the knowledge that he had spared an enemy. He denied fiercely to himself that he had done it so that the man might go back and tell of Germany’s great ship.

“*Nein*. I spared him because I challenged him and he was not my equal.” A smile spread across the German’s face and he told himself that he was a merciful man.

Yet—the object of his mercy shuddered in his cockpit and gibbered the things that shell-shock victims gibber. He had lived thirty minutes in an enemy’s guns. He had flown for 1800 seconds in the certain knowledge of death. Every tick of the clock along the dial would have been the last, if von Sternberg had willed it so. No man can live so long with such knowledge and come out whole.

No man had ever been beaten as badly as Fogarty, since men first took war into the sky. He landed in his shot-up ship and pushed silently through the ranks of his wondering comrades, the look of death on his face and the stare of the damned in his eyes.

German mercy had spared his body but, above the spade-shaped wood of d’Havincourt, it had killed his soul.

CHAPTER II FEAR FURY

FEAR IS A DISEASE that eats away a man’s belief in God and in himself. Jim Fogarty, who had blazed his way through forty combats in the winning of his sixteen victories, had scorned the thought of fear, had hurled it from him as the disease of cowards. In the isolation of his squadron office, he came face to face now with a grim truth. Fear had crept into his own being, a shivering fear that brought beads of moisture to his brow and palsy to his limbs.

He cursed and pulled a black bottle across the table. It was half empty now. It had been full a short while ago. He drank deeply, and as the fiery liquor raced down his throat, the door opened softly. Steve Donlin entered. The eyes of the two men met.

“Good boy!” Steve sauntered across the room, his manner elaborately casual. “Take a good snort and save a spot or two for me.” He reached for the bottle. There was nothing in his face to betray the fact that he observed anything unusual in Fogarty’s demeanor. If anything, he concealed his feelings too well. Donlin seldom drank.

“Go to hell for a while, will you, Steve boy. I’ve got to think!”

Fogarty ran his hand distractedly through his hair. The muscles of his face twitched. Donlin lighted a cigarette.

“Thinking’s bad for one,” he said easily. “Never supposed to do any in a war. There’s an article in the regulations forbidding it, I think.”

“The regulations don’t seem to amount to a lot in this squadron.”

The two men turned to the door as the silky voice broke in upon Donlin’s airy chatter. Greg Mallock stood there with a cigarette in his hand, the smoke curling from his nostrils. Fogarty cursed and lurched to his feet.

“What do you mean, Mallock, by barging in that way? These are my quarters.”

“Righto.” Mallock’s lips curled in a sneer. “If we must have Yankees in command of British squadrons, they must have private quarters. Quite! I don’t know if we have to accept Yankee regulations.”

The man was standing very straight against the door, his narrow eyes gleaming with malice. He had been ambitious to lead a squadron himself. Fogarty’s hands trembled and his powerful body balanced unsteadily, but his voice was an enraged roar.

“Get out of here. I’ll send for you when I want you. Get out!”

Donlin started to his feet. He sensed the breaking control of the man who had been as clever in command as in combat. Mallock had sensed the same breakdown and he was standing his ground. His voice came sharply defiant.

“No, I’m not getting out, Fogarty,” he said. “I’ve taken a lot from you. You went too far and I’ve got you where I want you. You aren’t big enough to scoff at regulations. You accepted a challenge to-day. Did you down von Sternberg?”

His narrow eyes showed that he knew the answer. No man comes back from a victory as Fogarty had come back. Donlin moved forward and Mallock waved him aside. Fogarty crouched like a wounded lion. The man from Montana was weak again as memory rushed over him. He lacked the strength to wave this weakling out of his way. Mallock snapped his fingers.

“Your bus was shot up. You didn’t down the man who challenged you—but you came home.” He paused. “Wing would enjoy hearing about that duel. They’d probably ask why you ran away.”

FOGARTY lurched forward with a roar. With blind rage propelling him, he cleared the table. His fist lashed out like a pile driver, catching the suddenly startled Mallock on the wing and hurling him against the solid panels of the door. With a moan, the man slipped to the floor. A tiny trickle of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth.

“Take that to Wing and be damned to you!”

Fogarty’s voice was out of control and Donlin gripped his arm. “Steady, old man. Pour yourself a dram and forget it. I should have barged in sooner. I’ll take care of him.”

Donlin turned away, bent over the slowly recovering Mallock and heaved him to his feet. “Outside with you,” he growled. “You and I are going to have a talk of etiquette.”

The door banged and Fogarty sank down on the chair. His face was white and the palsy was in his limbs again. In a few short hours the whole structure of his career had toppled. He could not see clearly nor think clearly, but some things seemed all too evident. Mallock had hated him from the first with that strange hatred which grows out of clashing personalities under the stress of war. The man had not spoken idly. He had Fogarty foul.

The regulations were only rules and the British worried as little about them as any people on earth while things went smoothly. Action, however, would follow swiftly on the heels of Mallock’s complaint if he made one. He’d make it now. Not only would he report the duel like the mucker he was, but he would also report something more grave. He would report violence at the hands of a superior officer.

“Hell with him!” Fogarty reached for the bottle. With a sweeping gesture of disgust, he dismissed Mallock from his mind. In Mallock’s place there appeared the face of Count Otto von Sternberg. Fogarty saw it in the tobacco haze of the room, a

broad, hard face that smiled with contemptuous confidence. That face was etched on his mind as he had seen it above the cowl of the Albatross. He felt that the face would ride him to the end of his chapter and the thought infuriated him. He drank deep and kicked his chair against the wall.

“Cursed swine of a German,” he growled. “I’m going to hunt the sky till I find him. I’ll have it out with him. He’s got to finish it, damn him!”

He hit the table with his fist and rose to his feet. His voice was deep and there was all the power in his lean frame that had been in it before he met von Sternberg. Yet Fogarty knew that he was mouthing a vain boast, that alcohol was speaking through his lips. To-morrow would be cold and gray and dreary. He would not be warmed, inflamed. He would go out and he would look at the sky and he would remember.

Lord, but he would remember! His mind would turn sick at the thought of that terrific half hour when he lived in shrinking expectation of the swift lead’s impact. He would remember how hopelessly outclassed he was and how easily the German had toyed with him. Then the ice would form in his veins again and his hands would shake and the yellow would crawl in his spine.

He would not hunt von Sternberg and he knew it. Through the alcoholic haze that clouded his mind, he recognized the truth. He would never seek von Sternberg again. The man had broken his spirit as a brutal trainer might break an animal. The man had not left him a shred of spirit upon which to build anew in confidence. He had outclassed him as a flyer, humiliated him, tortured him, and taunted him with careless superiority. Fighters have been eternally ruined in the ring by just such beatings. The sky is but a greater arena.

And yet, Fogarty did not fear death. He knew in his heart that he could face a firing squad grim-lipped or fly into the enemy’s guns with a smile. His fear was of something not so easily defined; it was fear of an experience, the fear that an animal knows in the presence of man, who is his inferior in strength.

“I’ll lick it,” he muttered thickly. “I’ll lick it. The Huns may have better ships but they’re not better men. They’re not better men.”

His hand reached out for the fortifying bottle.

FOGARTY was wrong. He did not like the thing that gripped his mind. When the patrols went out, Fogarty did not go with them. He availed himself of the

squadron commander’s privilege and remained in his quarters. He cursed himself and then drank to forget the accusations that he hurled upon his own honor.

The following day it was the same. The flight leaders took their men out and Fogarty remained behind. That day, the others met the Albatross for the first time and three of them did not come back. Those who did return spoke disconnectedly of the blazing speed with which the new German ships destroyed. Fogarty, who knew more about it than they did, shuddered and went back to his bottle. Mallock had not spoken again to Fogarty and Donlin had made no report on his talk with the man. Fogarty knew that Donlin had done his best but he was not deceived. Mallock was the hard-hater type and he would act in his time. A week before, Fogarty could have laughed at the other’s hatred. He had not met Fear then.

At the end of three days, Fogarty reached the point where he could temporize no longer. The men were whispering and looking at him with doubt in their eyes. Mallock, usually reserved and aloof, was mixing with the flyers of all three flights and there were sudden silences that greeted Fogarty’s arrival in any room. Donlin looked strained and worried.

On the morning of the twentieth, word came down from Wing that, due to concentration of troops for the British drive, it was imperative that German observation be checked at any cost.

Fogarty tightened his belt, took three jolts of fiery forgetfulness and led A on the dawn show.

It was clear for a change and the air at ten thousand was paralyzingly cold. Fogarty was glad of that. Physical discomfort kept his nerves from betraying him and he had lots to think about besides von Sternberg and the nameless dread that stalked with the memory of that name.

Deliberately ignoring Mossy Face, he cut his patrol line across the Front south of Arras, then north to Vimy and the Drocourt road. The Forty-second was traveling in three tiers. Steve Donlin, with B, was high at fifteen thousand, Mallock led C, at seven. Between them was Fogarty and his flight.

As they crossed the German position at Oppy,archie ranged Fogarty’s flight and cut loose. The black bursts flowered about the tiny flight with uncommon accuracy, and shrapnel tore through Fogarty’s right wing. He was conscious of the hiss of passing fragments above the bass wouff that was the voice of A.A. His lips parted and the gleam came back to his eyes. He likedarchie. It was a sporting thing.

Even as he registered the closeness of the range, he was getting out. His raised hand signaled to his flight and he deftly staggered the course, changing his general direction and seeking the higher levels. Archie slapped at the escaping prey futilely and Fogarty stiffened in the cockpit. His sharp eyes had been keeping tabs on the flight below him and that flight was going into action.

At about five thousand feet, three A.E.G.s were thudding toward the Allied lines. Mallock was racing to intercept them and death was stalking Mallock. In a tight flight, seven Fokker twos were diving forty-five degrees on the Nieuports.

Fogarty was all airman once more.

The doubts of the past few days were wiped from his mind in that one look down the sky lanes. His hand went up. For a second he held it and then his nose dropped.

The wind screamed in his wires and the engine roared full out along the long road down the sky. The Nieuports, like a wolf pack, were tearing at the A.E.G.s when the sky rained Fokkers. The Britishers wheeled to the new menace and then Fogarty struck.

With all of his old abandon, he launched his Nieuport at a Fokker that was riding top on a Nieuport. His Vickers blazed and a German face turned to him, gray with the knowledge of death. The black crosses showed for a second as the ship reeled, then ship and pilot were gone.

BEHIND Fogarty, A Flight had hit hard. The sky was a jumble of dogfighting ships and Fogarty wheeled like a circling hawk, keen eyes searching the best opportunity for fight.

Off toward the Allied lines, one A.E.G. raced on to its mission. Fogarty thought of the urgent message from Wing, "Stop observation at any cost." His hand lifted from the coupe button and he roared in pursuit.

Almost in his path, a lone Nieuport battled desperately with two flashing Fokkers. There was not another Nieuport within striking distance and the Germans held top hand. The Nieuport pilot had seconds in which to live unaided; the A.E.G. in a few seconds would have a lead that would defy pursuit.

The Nieuport whirled out of one death spot into another and Fogarty read the insignia. His heart thumped—Mallock!

The man who hated him enough to ruin him, the man who had threatened to bring charges against him, the man who was poisoning the squadron mind

against him, that man was buzzing helplessly in a trap of death and Fogarty was not obliged to save him. Fogarty's duty was to chase the A.E.G. With a curse, the squadron commander dropped his nose and roared into the Fokkers.

"Wonder whether Mallock would like the regulations now." His teeth flashed and the buck of his Vickers signed a death warrant. Tracers streaked across the short gap between his nose and the nearest Fokker, smoke curled from the Oberursel rotary and the wind whistled on the Fokker wires. That foe was done.

Mallock had seized his reprieve. He banked sharply as he sensed the coming assistance. In that moment he made a fatal mistake. He relied on rescue and, for a second, he forgot to guard himself. In that second, the Spandaus found him.

Fogarty, charging for a fresh victim, saw the Fokker turn on a dime and hurl the tracers into the cockpit of its foe. Mallock's hands flew from the controls, his body leaped against the restraining belt and his ship staggered out of a leaden rain. Fogarty had one glimpse of the man's face and he knew that his rescue attempt had been in vain.

The victorious Fokker was racing for freedom in a long dive and Fogarty knew that it would be useless to pursue him. Sadly he watched a crashing Nieuport take Mallock into the ground, then he turned back to the sky.

He had two flights now, or the remnants of them, to lead on the rest of the patrol.

Swiftly, efficiently, Fogarty lined up the scattered Nieuports. In a hasty check-up he discovered two missing planes. That would be Mallock, of course, and one other. He shook his head. Not so good.

As he climbed back to cruising level, he marveled that he was so calm, so controlled. The tearing crash of combat and the smell of death had not shaken his nerves. Those things had restored his poise. He wanted to sing and shout at the thought. Fear no longer rode in the cockpit and his was the feeling of invincibility that rides always with a conqueror who knows his own skill.

CHAPTER III DEAD KNUCKLES

OVER THE EMBATTLED RIDGE of Vimy they flew and back of the blazing line to Arras, which was the hub of the wheel, the center from which all the roads of the sector branched. Not till the red roofs of Croiselles came into view was there a sign of a foe. Then two clumsy observation planes skittered across the lines on their way back to Germany. Fogarty stiffened and threw a cautious look aloft for the escort.

At that moment, fear came back. It came with a chilling rush that filled the tiny cockpit with its damp breath. Fogarty's breath caught and his limbs trembled. His skin seemed suddenly to become aware of the cold.

High in the blue sky rode a flight of whale-shaped ships with spade tails.

"Von Sternberg!" Fogarty whispered the word. He didn't know that it was von Sternberg, but the outlines of that grim ship were engraved on his soul. This flight was composed of Albatrosses, blood brothers of the ship that had crushed him on St. Patrick's Day. Panic welled up in him and the chill blanket of fear choked and smothered him.

"Hold, man, hold! You're not afraid of death. Stay and fight it out. Nothing worse than fear. Lick that and you can lick the world."

Vainly his reason tried to hurl the message into his numbed nervous system. A memory that was more brutal than the thing it recorded overwhelmed him. He was left alone in the sky except for a blind instinct that looked neither ahead nor back.

Like a rabbit that plunges desperately for its hole out of the shadow of a hawk, Fogarty put his nose down and raced for his drome.

Death reached for the fleeing pilot a hundred times as he raced along the blazing Front and he never noticed it. Shells whistled across the sky and several times he was lifted seventy-five and a hundred feet in the air from the concussion. He cursed and raced on.

Archie, black flower of hate, bloomed for him and he passed it with a snarl, disdaining even to alter his course or to dodge. What was death? He had met death a hundred times without flinching. He had seen death

work and he had helped death work. It was an old friend. Some time the bony finger would beckon for him and he would come. It would be an adventure.

But fear? The cold hand of fear touched him and he shivered. The Nieuport raced faster before it and Fogarty did not look back. Nothing was chasing him and, subconsciously, he knew it. That was all right. The thing from which he fled was right in the cockpit with him. It did not have to chase him. If he were an infantry officer he would have been in a hospital and they would have called it shell-shock. He was a flyer and he would fly till they shot him down.

With the hairs standing on his body and the sweat heavy on his brow, he crowded the last ounce of gas to his engine, came around into the wind over his drome and cut the gun.

AS FOGARTY'S wheels touched the uneven ground, sanity flowed back to him. He remembered for the first time that he had given no signal to his flight. He had run off and left them with Albatrosses above and two-seaters below. He had deserted them and left them to their own luck and their own judgment.

With desperate hope in his heart he cast his eyes aloft. There was not a plane in the sky. He groaned and a mechanic spoke to him. With a blasting oath, Fogarty consigned the man and his questions to Gehenna and strode for quarters.

"What I need," he said brokenly, "is a drink. How I need a drink!"

His eyes registered no detail until he had taken a bottle from his drawer and pulled deep from its contents. He gave a strangling cough and his hand stretched for the official-looking envelope on his desk. Some premonition warned him of the contents but he laughed mirthlessly.

"Mallock and I'll bet a homstead in Heaven! Righto. Be no end comical. Slapped in the face by a dead man." He pulled the bottle to him and drank again.

"Saved the blighter's life. No, I didn't. Tried to save the blighter's life. Did m' best. Bet he stabbed me at H.Q. Dirty little hound, even if he is dead. Never speak well of the dead if you don't mean it. That's my motto."

He cocked his ear for the sound of returning ships. When he heard no sound he drank again. Slowly he turned the envelope over.

"Might jus' as well open it. Anybody who's going to be hit by a dead man might jus' as well get it over. Can't stop a dead man. Everybody hits Fogarty now anyway. Palooka. Jus' a common pushover."

The bottle went up again and then he opened the envelope. A thin sheet of paper fell out and he fumbled it four times before he picked it from the table. His eyes struggled with the typed message. As the meaning of what he read percolated through his dazed brain, he straightened in his chair. The alcohol left him and his fist clenched. The message was chillingly brief, addressed to "Lieutenant" James J. Fogarty and signed by the brigade commander.

Sir,

You are requested to turn over the command of the 42nd Squadron, to Lieutenant Stephen H. Donlin, who will, until further notice, bear the rank of "Acting Captain."

The temporary commission assigned to you has been withdrawn and you will resume your authorized rank effective this date.

Fogarty stared at the message and slowly read it a third time, then he crumpled it in his hand.

"They didn't even ask me to come in and defend myself," he growled. "They kick me down into the ranks like a straw dummy and I am supposed to love it."

He pulled the bottle to him and cursed. Three times he drank before he smoothed out the message and read again the words that stripped him of his captaincy. He had taken that captaincy for granted because he had been assured that the customary procedure was to make the commission temporary before confirming it. Now it was out.

"Donlin," he muttered. "Donlin! Now I wonder." His mind raced back to the scene in his office when Mallock had made his threats. Donlin had not spoken to the man in the room. He had talked to him outside and he had never reported on the conversation.

As though ashamed of the thought that came to him, Fogarty smashed his fist against the table top and rose to his feet. "Bah! I'm getting old or crazy or something. Steve's all right."

He lifted the bottle and looked at it, then he toasted to something unseen, voice husky and legs unsteady as he stood there. "To the dead hand!" He said. "You hit hard. May you handle a shovel as well!" He drank.

STEVE DONLIN, flying high with his top protection flight, had tensed in the cockpit as the Albatross group had ploughed serenely across the sky from the protection of a mountain of cloud. He counted noses.

"Seven of 'em," he muttered, "and they haven't spotted us."

A quick survey of the long stretches of sky between him and the ground, showed him the double flight of Nieuports to the south and the west of his position. It was a long look but he guessed the flight as eight or nine. His eyes gleamed.

"Eight of them and five of us against seven Huns. If only the Dutch boys go down."

He held to his course despite the temptation to turn and get ready for action. His flight was headed away from the scene of probable action but he dared not come about. If he should be discovered now, the Germans would believe that he failed to see them. If he turned, they would not go down and risk being caught between two fires. Steve held his breath.

The Nieuport flight was in plain view now, twenty-five hundred feet below and flying serenely along. The German flight leader's wings were wagging a signal to his flight. Donlin blinked.

For no apparent reason, the Nieuport flight leader had dropped his nose and was racing on a steep slant across the lines. The other Nieuports, even at that distance, betrayed the confusion of the startled pilots. The Germans were starting down.

"My God! Fogarty! And he ran away."

Donlin was stunned but he had no time for personal reactions. His hand went up and dropped, the signal for attack. The Nieuports responded and Donlin led them in a wild charge to head the Germans off.

Down the sky went the two lines of destruction. Albatross was plunging on Nieuport and Nieuport on Albatross. The frail wings of the Nieuport handicapped it in this game and Donlin dared not make his dive too steep. The Germans roared down.

The lower flight of Nieuports rolled with the German charge but Donlin groaned as he saw one ship literally blasted apart. His hand went to the trips and he warmed his guns. Then he struck.

Death blazing from five guns, the top-flight Nieuports came into the fray. The Germans sprawled awkwardly and two of them got the red ticket in the first wild melee. Donlin's eyes lighted as he slapped his guns.

"They've got a weakness," he shouted. "They've got a weakness. Damme, I had doubted it."

He was on the tail of a black ship that bore a leader's ribbons. His guns spat and the German wasn't there. With a burst of power, the Albatross skimmed out from under the menace of the Vickers and streaked for home. One by one the other Germans followed and Donlin swore softly.

“Speed? Oh, they’ve got it.” That burst of power from the ship he’d had by the tail had taken his breath. “But they can’t fight in close quarters. They need room. We have to remember.”

Exultantly Donlin swept around and surveyed the sky. Nieuports were scattered over ten or fifteen kilometers but he saw no evidence of further casualties apart from the man who had died in the first Albatross charge. Pointing his Very pistol upward, Donlin fired the signal that called the flight together.

AS THE Nieuports dropped down and formed into a big V at his back, Donlin counted and confirmed his first guess. He had not lost a man. Counting himself, he had an eleven-man flight.

“Licked ‘em, by the gods!” he murmured. “The first licking for the Albatross. Proves it can be done.”

He knew what that meant. The Albatross had had everybody worried. After this, morale would pick up and the nightmare of German invincibility would vanish. Suddenly he frowned and looked back once more at his big V. Something had just struck him wrong on that count.

There had been a big flight of eight Nieuports below him and he had had five. That made thirteen. One man had gone in the guns of the Germans and left twelve. He had only eleven left. There should be another. He straightened and the joy went out of him.

“Fogarty!” he breathed. Fogarty had run away.

That monstrous fact stuck out and obscured the glory of victory. Fogarty the mighty, leader of a squadron and big ace of the sector, had quit in the face of fire. He had run and left his flight to the mercy of the enemy.

Fiercely, Donlin fought to justify or explain the act to himself. Engine trouble or jammed guns or a wound! He shook his head. That fleeing Nieuport had had a good engine and Fogarty, the Fogarty of old, would not have left his flight even if the gun was jammed. He would have stayed and fought the jam. If the worst happened, he would have fought with his uncanny flying skill and without a gun.

Donlin hoped that his leader had a wound but he feared that the hope was a vain one. Fogarty had changed, the fight was out of him and he had become another man, a creature that would never have won wings, much less acehood.

With his brow furrowed and a nameless dread in his heart, Donlin set his little ship down on the drome and rolled gently in. Tommy Goddard of A Flight

landed fast and was out of the cockpit before Donlin’s feet touched the ground. He came across to the flight leader’s cockpit in a bound, his face savage.

“Steve,” he said fiercely, “I want to have a talk with you before you go in. So will the others, I’m thinking. Fogarty quit like a dog to-day and damned if—”

“Wait a minute, Tommy. You don’t know.” Donlin’s face was gray. He had known that this was coming but foreknowledge didn’t help now. Goddard made a slashing motion with his clenched fist.

“Dammit, I do know. He’s been moping and drinking like a swine and staying out of the air. To-day he quit. He quit, I tell you, and Larry—” Tommy Goddard’s voice broke.

Donlin recalled that Larry Vance had been Tommy Goddard’s inseparable chum. He knew now which man had gone beneath the Albatross guns. He bowed his head.

“Larry’s number was up, Tommy,” he said slowly. “Fogarty couldn’t have saved him.”

“Now you’re saying something you can’t prove.” Tommy’s voice was choked and hoarse but his eyes blazed. The other pilots were crowding around and their faces betrayed their feelings. Donlin knew that the jury had voted and that Jim Fogarty was branded in this flight.

Hugh Manning, who flew in Donlin’s own flight, stepped forward. “We know it’s tough on you, Steve. He’s your friend.” Manning looked around, saw that there was no objection to his acting as spokesman, and plunged ahead.

“The point is that you’re the only flight leader left. McCord tells me that Mallock went to-day, too. Fogarty isn’t fit to lead a flight, much less a squadron. It’s your place to tell Wing that, before Fogarty gets us all killed. We’re putting it up to you.”

Donlin’s jaw set and his eyes swept the assembled pilots. “You’re putting it up to me, are you? You’re judging a man without a trial and you’re trying to make me your executioner. Well, you won’t. Jim Fogarty is sick and I’m not going to kick him or let any one else do it.”

“He isn’t sick.” Tommy Goddard edged forward aggressively. “You know he isn’t sick. He’s got his wind up and he’s foundering himself on liquor. That’s all.”

Steve Donlin’s hot eyes stabbed the little pilot, then swept the crowd. “Anybody here able to throw stones on the drinking business?”

Several of the men looked embarrassed. Hugh Manning shrugged.

“Drinking in a crowd the way we drink is one thing. Climbing into a corner and drinking yourself into a lonely daze is another thing. You know it.”

Donlin snapped his fingers. “You fellows are shooting too soon and you’re going to feel like ruddy fools. Think it over!”

With an impatient swing to his shoulders, he turned and stalked toward the stone chateau that was quarters for the Forty-second. Once out of sight of the other pilots, however, the assurance left him. The lines in his face deepened and his mouth set hard. He knew that reason had been with the men of the flight and sentiment with him. He had been loyal to Fogarty and he owed the bigger responsibility to the men who might die for Fogarty’s failures.

“Dammit, I can’t turn old Jim in,” he muttered, “and I’ve got a picture of how much talk he’ll listen to. What in the blinking blazes can I do?”

The official-looking envelope that awaited him in his quarters answered the question. It told him as it had told Fogarty that the King was dead; long live the King. Hereafter, Donlin would be squadron commander and Fogarty would serve.

“And won’t that be a helluva situation? Poor old Jim!” With a gesture of irritation, Donlin crumpled the thin official sheet. There was no glory in his advancement. He could see too plainly the bones of the man over whom he climbed.

CHAPTER IV FOGARTY’S GREEN FOUR

THE REPLACEMENTS CAME UP at four-thirty, eager, awed, and inclined to swagger. Donlin received them gravely, gave them a squadron commander’s welcome and passed swift judgment upon each man in a flashing glance. The lives of veterans too often depend upon the caliber of a rook. One could not be indifferent to them.

Fogarty did not appear for mess and when the men scattered to the bar and the phonograph and to the writing of letters, Donlin squared himself for an unpleasant task and sought Fogarty. He found him smoking quietly behind his scarred table, a half empty bottle before him but little evidence of drunkenness in his manner.

“Hello, Steve. Coming in to break the news?”

Donlin shook his head. “No. I figured you’d know about it. I came in to tell you I’m damned sorry.”

The man from Montana shrugged. “Fortunes of war. I’m glad you got it. It had to be somebody.” His hand crept toward the bottle and he did not look at Donlin. Suddenly his hand fell away and he came to his feet.

“I’m acting like a mucker,” he said. “I’ve been hating your guts for getting the squadron, Old Man, and that’s pretty rotten for Jim Fogarty.” He stuck out his hand and Donlin took it.

“You haven’t been yourself for a long time, Jim. What’s the matter?”

A cloud passed across Fogarty’s face. He shrugged and the gesture with which he dismissed the subject had something of the old Fogarty mastery in it.

“Woofits, I guess,” he said wryly. “It’s something in the blood. My dad was a sheriff up in Montana when the cattlemen’s war was on. I was just a shaver but I remember him moping for three days with yellow clean up his spine, before he went out and got an Arizona killer that he knew he had to get from the very first. I guess maybe that’s what’s the matter with me. I’m mopin.”

Donlin’s eyes narrowed. He had a flash of intuition. “What made your dad snap out of it?”

Fogarty walked slowly around the table and poured himself a drink.

“The Arizona galoot killed his best friend while the old man was moping. Dad got Arizona and the two tough hombres that trailed with him and he didn’t even empty his gun doing it.”

There were grim lines on Fogarty’s face as his memory rode an old trail. Donlin was tense.

“And afterwards?” he said softly. “Was he ever afraid again?”

“There wasn’t any afterwards.” Fogarty’s gesture was simplicity itself. “He took four slugs in exchange for the four he gave. Any one of them would have been enough. Have a drink?”

Donlin drank. He had been raised in Colorado himself and the blazing glory of a frightened man’s passing struck home hard. For the moment, that little fight in some forgotten cowtown main street seemed bigger than the war which flamed across the face of France. Fogarty set his glass down with a click.

“Do I get a flight, Steve?”

Donlin was wrenched back to the present. His lips tightened, as he remembered Tommy Goddard’s

blasting denunciation of Fogarty, and the united front that the men had presented under Hugh Manning's leadership when Manning demanded Fogarty's removal. It would be hard to find a flight for Fogarty. He hesitated and looked away. Fogarty's eyes read the truth in his face and the face of the former squadron leader whitened.

"They won't fly behind me."

Donlin's jaw hardened.

"They'll fly," he said crisply, "and they'll take orders. You'll lead A."

Fogarty reached for a fag. His hand trembled. "Damn a flight that follows me because they must," he said. "I won't have them. I want men who believe in me, who'll go to hell for me and who will follow me where I go."

THE liquor had its grip on Fogarty and he was feeling invincible again. He was forgetting his defeats and remembering only that once he might have taken the scrubbiest flight in France, tackled Germany's best with it and stood a chance. Donlin's memory was not so fluid. He was wondering, in spite of himself, what would have happened if the flight had followed Fogarty a few short hours before when Fogarty ran away.

Fogarty was pacing the room. Suddenly he stopped.

"You said I could have a flight. You've got some replacements. Give them to me."

Donlin straightened. He had anticipated no such fantastic proposal as that. To assign green men to fly under a man whom the veterans wouldn't follow? Ridiculous. He shook his head.

"The rooks have to be distributed till they get experience," he said gently. Fogarty hit the desk.

"Bosh! I led a squadron for a long time. The vets don't want the rooks. They think they're a bloody nuisance. The rook gets his own experience whether he flies with veterans or flies alone."

"He lives longer."

"He does not." Fogarty strode to the door. "I'm taking your word. You promised me a flight. I'll get it by the volunteer method." His jaw was hard. "I'll also find out who thinks I'm what and why."

Before Donlin could stop him he had slammed out into the main assembly room. The sprawled men looked up and silence fell on the room except for the chatter of the replacements. This, too, died out as the youngsters became aware of the tension. Fogarty was standing very straight and there was a smile on his

face. Ignoring the older men, he crossed the room to the green crowd.

"I'm Fogarty," he said. "I used to lead this squadron."

The rooks came to their feet with a bound. One after another they gave their names. Teale, Sanger, Jones, Flick. The awe in their faces and the evident pleasure they felt in meeting so celebrated an ace was a tonic to Fogarty's soul. He was still a hero to those who had followed his flaming, meteoric career, even if he were no longer a hero in his own squadron.

"I'm glad to meet you gentlemen," he said, "We need you up here. Some of us aren't as good as we used to be. New blood is recommended."

The replacements smiled. The idea of Fogarty, the great Fogarty, talking about not being as good as he used to be. Quite a spoofer. Flick, a curly-headed youngster with a wide, white smile, pinched out the glowing end of his cigarette and held the stub up.

"This fag didn't need the light," he said. "It's still a perfectly smokable cigarette. The light's gone. Lights are more plentiful than cigarettes." He made a mocking bow to his companions. "We're just the lights and you veterans are good tobacco."

It was just one of those poetical, modest speeches that rooks were noted for, but it caught the fancy of the others. Teale, a comically long-legged youth, bobbed his head. "Righto," he drawled. "There's nothing more comman than air soldiers that haven't soldiered."

Fogarty raised an eyebrow. The silence and hostility of the veterans in the room was meant for him and he reacted to it defiantly.

"You boys are kidding yourselves," he said. "You'd be surprised to find how hard it is sometimes for a veteran to get any one to follow him. I'll show you."

He turned to the silent room. "Captain Donlin has assigned me a flight," he said, "but has not named the men assigned. I'm asking for volunteers."

Dead silence greeted him but the air of tension increased. Stony stares answered his quizzical, defiant smile. He turned to the replacements. "You see?"

THE youngsters were evidently bewildered. Flick looked around doubtfully and wet his lips. "If it's all right," he said, hesitantly, "for us to volunteer, I mean, well, I'd like to be the first."

"Righto." Teale bobbed his head. "Me, too." Sanger, a quiet, rosy-cheeked chap, blushed at hearing the sound of his own voice. "It would be a privilege to follow Captain Fogarty."

Fogarty winced at the "Captain." He looked toward the fourth rook. Jones was looking curiously around the room but his eyes came back to Fogarty.

"There's a catch in it," he said slowly, "but you look good to me. Count me in."

"You're damned right there's a catch in it." Tommy Goddard was on his feet, face flushed and fists clenched. "You kids are making a suicide club out of yourselves and—"

"This is my show, Goddard!" Fogarty's voice wilted the objector where he stood. There was fire in Fogarty's eyes now and it was hard for Goddard to get over the memory that this man had been squadron commander and big hell in the 42nd. Fogarty turned to the rookies.

"What Lieutenant Goddard wanted to tell you," he said softly, "is that Jim Fogarty is yellow, that he ran away from a fight to-day. It's something I was going to tell you anyway."

The rookies were quite evidently taken aback, but Flick shook his head. "I don't believe it," he said firmly. The other replacements looked relieved. None of them wanted to find feet of clay in the idol of the R.F.C. and Flick's prompt declaration of allegiance steadied them. Fogarty bowed.

"Thank you, gentlemen. The charge happens to be true. The explanation is a long one. I don't care to go into it. All I can do is give you my assurance that it is not a habit. It will not happen again."

"No explanations needed." Flick looked around his group and saw they were leaving it to him. "We're with you. Nobody with your record has to explain anything that happens in the air."

The youngster seemed to realize that he was taking sides with one man against a roomful. The idea excited him. Youth likes to lead forlorn hopes and back lost causes. Jones looked toward Donlin, who stood at the far end of the room with a frown on his face.

"I rather think we should ask Captain Donlin's permission before we go any further," he said quietly. He looked again toward Fogarty. "I'm playing ball if the squadron commander says the word."

Hugh Manning was on his feet. His voice was deep and resonant.

"This is a blasted outrage. Fogarty has been reduced in rank for reasons considered sufficient by H.Q. He admits he flunked to-day and he's been washed out for a week. Donlin, I demand—"

"Who are you to demand anything." Fogarty's shoulders were hunched. He advanced menacingly.

"You big dude, I took you for your first hop over the lines. You're still here and better men have—"

"Stop! This is not a matter for either of you. I was called into this discussion. I'm exercising my right to settle it."

Donlin's boots clicked across the floor. Manning dropped back grumbling. Fogarty stood with his legs wide apart, head lowered like an animal at bay. Donlin ignored them both and addressed the wondering rooks.

"It is your privilege to volunteer for duty under Lieutenant Fogarty." His voice hesitated on the "Lieutenant." "It is my duty to call your attention to matters which might influence your judgment."

Fogarty moved as though to speak. Donlin waved him back. "Lieutenant Fogarty was reduced in rank for reasons undivulged by Wing. I happen to know, however, of certain happenings which make me morally certain that the reduction in rank had nothing to do with his valor or lack of it."

THERE was a sigh of relief from the rooks, a growl from the veterans. The movement in the room was like the restless stirring of the sea. Donlin felt the opposing forces but he held firm.

"I would be less than fair, if I did not tell you that it is customary for replacements to go out in flights composed for the most part of veterans. Their chances are better and I advise it now, while recognizing your option in the matter."

He looked straight at Fogarty. "Lieutenant Fogarty has admitted to you that a regrettable incident happened to-day. I do not think that Lieutenant Fogarty need explain, but you are entitled to know that he has not been in top-hole condition physically. I am opposed to his leading a flight composed of green men."

Fogarty lurched forward.

"Why not break me, then? Why go through the mockery of making me a flight leader without a flight?"

Donlin's face was gray. "You are entitled to a flight by rank and seniority. Wing did not decide otherwise." He looked around the room defiantly. "I know of no reason why you should not lead a flight. My disappointment is that veterans should pronounce a judgment that the newest recruits would scorn."

Silence greeted the charge, then Manning rose to his feet. "I volunteer," he said, "for the sake of the rooks."

Fogarty's jaw set hard. "Application refused. I don't want you."

As though that act of a man whose back was to the wall broke the bars of hostility, the others surged forward. To a man they expressed a willingness to follow the lead of Fogarty. The man from Montana turned back to the replacements.

"You boys still with me?"

"You bet!" Their faces were shining as though they had scored a personal victory in the way that things had turned out. Fogarty turned to the men who had served with him in his hours of glory. He snapped his fingers.

"The hell with the rest of you," he said. "I'll fly the colors of my ancestors and my flight will be green."

There was the old swagger to his shoulders as he turned back to his newly organized flight and a warm glow in his eyes. Donlin was biting his lip. Now his hand reached out and he touched Fogarty's shoulder.

"A minute with you, Jim," he said. Fogarty nodded. Together they walked to the corner of the room. Donlin's mouth was hard.

"I don't like this, Jim, but you took the play away from me. It was a dirty trick, but I backed you up. Now the lives of those youngsters are in your hands."

He paused and his eyes were stern with the coldness of a man who is a squadron commander before he is a friend.

"No more solitary drinking goes," he said firmly. "Until those kids can look after themselves, you'll walk a chalk line."

He turned and stalked to his quarters. Fogarty looked after him and shrugged; his lips twisted wryly.

"That from Mr. Donlin," he drawled. "Well, it looks like Fogarty and his green ones against the world."

The thought exhilarated him.

CHAPTER V LIGHTS OUT

JIM FOGARTY DID NOT FEEL INVINCIBLE in the cold gray of morning. The inevitable depression which follows the wearing off of liquor's flow had brought him dreams of a black Albatross and of a coldly smiling face that looked at him over the cowling. Von Sternberg stalked him through the night and by morning von Sternberg was again the victor.

It was with an effort that Fogarty put vigor and

heartiness into the speech he gave his nervous rookies. In his heart he was cursing the quixotic, blind stupidity of the night before. He had gone in for heroics and he had been Jim Fogarty against the world. That had been night when pursuit pilots did not fly. Now it was morning and he had a rendezvous with death. It looked different with the vapor curling in thin mist from the ground and with the smell of death on the damp air. Heroes are always fools in the moments when they are not heroic. Fogarty cursed.

Suddenly he knew that he could not go through with it; he couldn't lead those boys into the sky with his mind racing at engine speed and with a grim memory striving to wrench the stick from his hands. He had to slow up that racing mind, had to banish memory and clutch again at the high excitement of invincibility. He knew what he needed and with a muttered apology he wheeled and darted back to the old chateau.

In his quarters he downed two fiery swallows of liquor. The blood raced in his veins. Hastily filling a flask, he stuck it in the trousers pocket of his Sidcot. Confidence came back to him. He'd go through with this warmth in his veins. He'd go through and he'd take the kids through.

He was late coming out. Donlin was searching for him and he didn't want to see Donlin. He waved to the squadron leader while still at a safe distance.

"Okay. Sorry. Forgot something."

He was making for his Nieuport. Donlin hesitated. Manning, who was temporary flight leader for C, was getting his flight off. Manning would fly top V in the triple flight formation. There were a few moments yet. Donlin strode across to Fogarty.

"Jim, what did you go back for?" There was a worried note in Donlin's voice. Fogarty felt a rush of shame and, for the first time in his life, he evaded a head-on question.

"Wrong goggles."

Donlin's eyes narrowed. Fogarty was still reacting to the stimulation of alcohol. He showed it.

"If you've been drinking, by the gods!" Donlin tensed. "You won't take a ship off this field."

"I'm commanding this flight. It's time to take off." Fogarty swung into the cockpit. The rooks were already crouched in theirs awaiting the zero moment. As Donlin stood hesitant, Fogarty gave the signal for the chocks to be pulled. He was off down the field with his green flight trailing after him. Donlin swore softly.

It had not been in the squadron leader to publicly

humiliate a leader who had won the support of a hero-worshipping group of rooks. It would have hurt their chances of ever being real aces. Subtle psychological factors operate to make men great or mediocre and these factors are strained in wartime. Apart from that, however, Donlin had been badly placed.

One flight had already taken off, and time made all the difference. The delay that would ensue in getting the youngsters a leader or splitting their flight would have left Manning's group alone with Fate. It might have meant slaughter.

IT WAS with foreboding that Donlin saw the green flight go. He hustled to his own flight and snapped a command to the mecs. The line of flight called for Manning on top, Fogarty in the middle and Donlin below. That afforded the rooks the best chance of escaping a grim surprise. Now Donlin was pushing the take-off time. He was going to be closer to Fogarty than he had originally planned. He had a hunch.

Aloft Fogarty was feeling the need of more raw courage of the bottled kind. To-day he could not leave. If von Sternberg came down he would have to stay if he froze in the cockpit. The blind trust of the four men who followed him would chain him against any terror in the world. He knew that he would not quit to-day but he knew that he would want to quit. On that thought, fear rode into his cockpit.

Like a summer shower the Albatross scouts came down on him. He never saw them till they struck and only the vigilance of Jones at the V tip prevented a slaughter. The tracers smashed into Fogarty's wing and he cursed as he kicked rudder.

"Suprised, by God! Caught like the rawest rook in the flight." He didn't understand his own lapse, but with the flaming guns of a striped destroyer yearning for him he had no time to analyze. In a desperate, flashing maneuver he whipped up to the top of a loop and dropped off upside down.

The Albatross flashed across his sights. Fogarty's lean lips curled in a snarl and he palmed the gun trips. The Vickers bucked and lead, whanged its way across the blue; hot lead, lead that traveled twenty-five hundred feet a second, flashed between the ships like light. With a derisive twist, the striped plane rolled out of the path of destruction. The tracers tore their way across the sky to waste their hitting power in empty space. Fogarty blinked. He had had his foe dead to rights and he had missed him. A little too slow on the trips.

He had time to register the fact that he was not afraid of these Albatrosses, that the old feeling of terror was not there. He just wasn't any good in a flight.

The German had dipped left and was coming back at him in a hurtling zoom. Fogarty banked about and for a moment he had the whole sky in his eyes. Oceans and mountains and valleys of cloud swept out there below him, but there was one big hole down which he looked. Coming up through that hole was another flight. Donlin!

He lunged viciously for the German and missed again. The tracers sang close. Donlin was coming to his rescue. Donlin knew he needed help. He, Fogarty, was going to need help to get out of the trap that he had flown into blindly.

That wasn't all. His heart felt squeezed. Two of the Nieuports had gone flaming down to oblivion. Two of the boys who had trusted him were paid in bitter coin for that trust.

THE Albatross was on Fogarty's tail now. Fogarty twisted and squirmed to shake him loose. A well placed burst flacked through the Nieuport's wing and Fogarty cursed again. His mind seemed dull. He couldn't concentrate and his reflexes were slow. He was doing the right thing, but he was not doing it fast enough. In that moment he knew that in killing fear he had also killed the thing that made him a fighter. He was a slowed-up dummy in a cockpit, not a man.

A Nieuport with the Yale bulldog on its fuselage zipped across his vision and he saw two Germans sitting on the fellow's tail. That would be Flick, poor devil! Fogarty dropped his nose and roared straight out for the battle below him. The hell with the German behind him. He was going to pull Flick out.

The Albatross pilot was disconcerted. He knew his book and he knew that no one ever dived away from a ship that was on his tail. This American could not be such a fool. By the time he was convinced that Fogarty was that kind of an idiot, Fogarty had closed with the two scouts below him.

He had surprise on his side. The others never saw him coming and his first look down the sights showed him the back of a head below the cutaway wing. He smiled grimly and pressed the trips.

A deadly stream of lead poured from his gun and raked the Albatross aft of the pilot's seat. The man turned a white face and walked on his rudder. Fogarty cursed futilely and hopelessly. He had missed again.

Flick's plane caught a broadside and folded up in the air.

In another second, Donlin was in the fight. Like a flashing meteor, Donlin's Nieuport crossed the sky and his guns chattered. There was a spreading of planes, a few seconds of wild melee and two Albatross scouts sought Valhalla. Then, magically, the sky was clear and the Nieuports were reforming. Two survivors of the Albatross flight were diving into the clouds and sanctuary. Fogarty redressed and hung his head low. His thirteen official victories were very remote now. He was washed up.

Silently the pilots of the Forty-second Squadron piled from the cockpits at their own field. Fogarty, his lean length uncoiling like a spring as he leaped to the ground, cast a grim look down the line and then wheeled toward the shell-battered chateau. The hasty check-up only confirmed what he already knew. His four rookies had taken their first trip over the line and their last. They were answering a roll call somewhere else now, rookies still.

With heavy feet, Fogarty dragged his way to his own quarters in the old chateau. At one time, the castle of a marauding and murderous duke, the old stone pile made good quarters. Fogarty didn't care now for quarters as such. What Fogarty wanted was a good stiff drink.

As the liquor scorched his throat, he thought irrelevantly of Flick and his little trick with a cigarette. He sat the bottle down hard.

"The lights have gone out now," he said bitterly, "and the cigarette is just a butt. What next?"

IT WAS a sick Steve Donlin who reassembled his flyers after the disastrous fight with the Albatrosses. Everything that the squadron leader had in skill and daring had gone into his desperate attempt at rescue. Two Nieuports had shrieked flaming down the sky while the dogfight was still a distant circle of tiny specks in the sky. He had seen the other two fold under the guns in the last frantic minute when he had all but reached them.

In a daze he saw Fogarty land his ship, sole survivor of the flight he had led. The lean ace slid down from the cockpit, threw a hasty glance down the line of ships and shuddered. In long strides he made for the chateau. Donlin did not follow immediately. He wanted time to think. Think!

How hard that thinking was! Maneuver though he might he was faced with the inevitable conclusion.

Jim Fogarty was through. As squadron leader, Donlin could not allow him to fly again. The man was punch-drunk and broken, from a defeat that had shattered his morale. He could still fly but John Barleycorn had to take the stick.

"I'll have to ground him." There was misery in Donlin's voice. "It's best for him. He'll get himself killed if he continues to fly."

Even as he voiced the thought, Donlin knew that it was an evasion. For a man such as Fogarty, death in the sky was preferable to the losing of his wings. Still the path of duty was plain. It was not just Fogarty; it was a matter of other lives, the men who would have to put their trust in Fogarty's shaky guns. In short, bitter, mental doses, it was being driven home to Donlin that a man who flies at the Front is a fool to have a friend. One deals top cards to pain when one cares for another where Mars stalks.

"Fogarty or no Fogarty, I'll do what I have to do."

Donlin strode grimly to the chateau. For twenty-five minutes he worked on his reports, then he rose and made his way to Fogarty's quarters.

The man from Montana was swimming deep in liquor. His eyes were shot with blood and his lips trembled. He fumbled the bottle and his scarred, table top was wet. With a grin of defiance he waved to Donlin and vaguely indicated a chair.

"Cheerio! Load off your feet. Have a drink? No. Don't blame you. Can't afford to drink with Jim Fogarty. Drunken bum. Terrible. Beachcomber and whatnot."

Donlin was standing very straight, his back braced against the door. His voice came, coldly remote.

"You broke faith with me to-day, Jim. You went into the air drunk, with the boys I let you have. They didn't come back."

Fogarty winced and hurled a drink at the back of his throat. "Leave drink out of this. Got nothing to do with it. Fortunes of war. I didn't want to come back."

Donlin believed that. He knew the instinct which keeps a man swimming even after he has deliberately set out to drown himself. It made his job harder.

"Jim, I'm approving a leave of absence and a recommendation that you be sent to England for a rest." Fogarty stiffened. "Washing me out, eh?" His eyes narrowed. "Stringing along with a bunch of Limies and throwing down the only Yank in the flight besides yourself. Beginning to feel like God and a squadron leader, aren't you?"

The man from Montana was drunk and belligerent.

Donlin was pale but he held to his control. Fogarty stormed on. "I'll see you in hell before I go back. You'll do the job right or you won't do it. You can't break me gently by calling it a leave. You've got to break me right and send me back without my buttons and my stripes."

Donlin made a weary gesture. "You're making it hard, Jim. We were friends before either of us flew an hour. You haven't backed me up. I'm trying to save you from yourself."

Fogarty cursed and hurled his glass across the room. "Be one thing or another, can't you? You're the squadron muck-a-muck. You can't be that and be the sobbing friend, too. You ball things up."

Donlin's control broke and his dark eyes blazed.

"It's got to be balled up. You flew like a damned fool to-day and you lost four men. If it were any one else who flew that flight drunk, I'd break him for insubordination, for drunken ness, for inefficiency—"

Fogarty's face was white under the grease and the tan. He kicked his chair back and stood swaying. "Break and be damned!" he said hoarsely. "I'm not hiding behind friendship or anything that happened years ago. I'm a drunkard and insu-ah, hell! Righto. Inefficient as hell. Right! You can—"

Donlin's jaw was set so hard that the veins throbbled under his ear. He stepped around the table. "You're taking that leave of absence whether you want to or not. And you're taking it now!"

His hand flashed with the devastating zoom of an Albatross. Fogarty saw it coming but couldn't get out of the way. It winged to its target like a German 105 and the man from Montana went down in his tracks. Donlin's breath came through his nostrils in a thin whistle and he dropped into a half crouch.

Outside a big shell screamed across the lines and burst somewhere beyond the chateau with an unearthly roar. Somehow it seemed a symbol of the bigger conflict that swallowed so many small ones. Donlin dropped to his knees.

There was a stricken, paralyzed look in Fogarty's face but his breath came evenly. He was out cold and he seemed destined to remain that way for some time. The weight of the blow had found a good ally in the stupefying liquor. Donlin looked around.

It was very still in the chateau. Not a sound came through the big door. Donlin tiptoed across and opened it. There was no one in the assembly room.

That was a relief, but he had half expected it. At this hour the men usually concerned themselves with the armament of their ships or conferred with the

mechanics and riggers. Donlin wasted no time. With a powerful heave he lifted Fogarty to his shoulders and made for the stairs which led below.

"It's rough," he muttered, "but if I can keep him away from liquor and remove the strain of deciding whether to fly and fight, I may save him yet."

CHAPTER VI DUNGEON LEAVE

WHEN FOGARTY CAME BACK to consciousness, it was with a sense of unreality, of wonder. Somewhere in his life there was a blank space, something scrambled that he couldn't put together.

"Need a drink," he muttered. He rolled over and his hand scraped against rough stone. He blinked and raised himself on one elbow. His eyes widened.

A rat was sitting in the middle of the floor staring at him and he was in some kind of cell. The shock brought him to himself and he staggered to his feet. A door opened in his memory and he recalled the fist that had come hurtling toward his jaw. He cursed and felt a tender spot on his chin; he wobbled his jaw experimentally and winced at the pain that shot up to his ear. His eyes wandered around the walls in dazed wonder.

Sheer rock walled him in. Not a window showed to break the expanse. At one end of the chamber in which he found himself, was a massive, frowning door of a type associated with medieval dungeons. Running half way across the cell on the opposite side of the room was a crevice in the rock high against the ceiling, a good thirteen feet from the ground. Through this filtered a soft, Cathedral light. So far away that it sounded muffled was a faint booming. That would be the war.

Emboldened by the success of the first pioneer, three more rats had emerged from somewhere, gaunt, gray creatures of incredibly evil aspect. Fogarty cursed and stamped his foot at them. Like Fokkers in the high clouds, they were gone in a flash. Before Fogarty had crossed the four-foot space that separated him from the bare bench that was the solitary piece of furniture in the cell, they were back. There were six of them now and their concentrated stare was unnerving. Fogarty cursed and passed the back of his hand across his lips.

"I need a drink," he muttered. "Need one bad."

He was still staring about him dazedly. Nothing seemed to connect up. He couldn't place his surroundings nor the course of events that had landed him here. He could remember that fist coming at him and nothing more.

"Jail," he muttered. "A cell! The brig. No sense to it. I'm in a war and—"

Something clicked in his mind and he came to his feet with an oath that scattered the rats. The scene in the room came back to him in a vivid flash and he knew where he was.

"Damn Donlin for a psalm-singing old grandmother!" he raved. "Got all steamed about a little drink and—"

The cords stood out in his arms as he raised his clenched fists and glared, around him. His voice snapped and crackled as he cursed Donlin and the R.F.C. and the war. His heavy boot kicked the bench over and he paced wildly, berserk in his rage.

For an hour he stormed. Then the oppressive loneliness beat him down. The walls mocked him and threw his words in his face, while only a faint distant booming gave evidence of another world and of other people. He gritted his teeth and stood swaying in the middle of the cell.

He was there for several moments before the rats ventured forth again. Their pattering footsteps brought him back to reality and he swore softly.

"If I had a drink—" he whispered; then futility swept him and he shrugged, crossing the room dejectedly and righting the bench. There were three fags in his pocket and he lighted one. It made him feel better and quieted his nerves. The rats fled once more before the lighted match he flipped at them. Fogarty laughed.

WITH his tobacco blazing, Fogarty could see through the fog in his mind and fill in the blank places. Donlin had said something about a leave of absence. Then Donlin had hit him. Huh. He looked about him again. He knew this place now.

He and Donlin had discussed these old cells when they had first taken over the chateau. Old punishment cells, two tiers down. Some lousy duke used to put his enemies on ice that way. Put 'em down in the earth and let 'em rot. Now Donlin had done that to him, Donlin who used to be his friend.

He went into a towering rage again and flung himself against the massive door. He'd get out of this hole and he'd strangle Donlin with his two hands. He'd

tear his windpipe out and ask him how he'd like to be buried down with the rats. He'd choke him till he begged for mercy.

"No, Donlin would never beg. I'm talking wild, I guess. God, how I need a drink!"

He felt weak, emotionally drained. For an hour he sprawled on the bench, his mind leaping from one trivial thing to another. The smile on the face of a German—only victim of his he'd ever seen, dead and glad of it . . . The dirty lake at Ypres . . . Benner's wings coming off at ten thousand . . . The Frog who walked into the prop at Juilly. . . Hollister landing his plane and climbing out of his cockpit, dead before he hit the ground . . . Flick's bus coming apart and—

He leaped to his feet. Flick had died out there because he, Fogarty, had missed his burst at that Hun. Teale and Sanger and Jones had died because Fogarty flew into a trap. Dead, all of them. Donlin considered him a murderer. That's why Donlin had locked him up.

He paced that out, cursing at the ruts and throwing himself back on the bench only when his head pounded and he felt exhaustion claiming him. He fished in his pockets. Two fags. Carefully he broke one of them in half, reserving half of it for later. He wasn't clear in his own mind about supplies, but he had an idea that Donlin would do something about that. Donlin was pretty white.

Through the aching haze in his head he pieced Donlin's motives together as he understood them and cursed. He'd beat Donlin to a pulp. First, though, he'd take a drink.

He fell asleep on the hard bench thinking about that and when the rats woke him by scurrying across his face, the light had ceased to filter in through the crevice and it was black as a tomb. Through the Stygian darkness only one thing was visible, the malevolently gleaming eyes of his companions. In their steady stare he saw again the contemptuously cold face of von Sternberg. The sweat oozed out of his skin and fear came back to him.

It was hours later, hours that seemed days, before he heard a scratching sound that wasn't made by the rodents. He stiffened and his heart leaped. Maybe Donlin had relented and was going to let him out. He cursed bitterly. He'd have none of Donlin's relenting. He was going to break Donlin's neck.

Like a swooping shadow, he crossed the cell to the door, his fists poised. There was a movement outside and a clicking sound as though a lock were being

turned. Fogarty's lips drew back from his teeth and he crouched. When that door opened!

WITH a click a panel slipped back, high in the door. A flashlight shot its beam into the cell and with a baffled oath, Fogarty saw the bars against the beam. Whoever was out there did not have to open the door. There was a little window in the door and that window was barred.

Before the imprisoned man could give vent to his disappointment, a voice hailed softly from the corridor outside.

"Fogarty! Fogarty!" The beam leaped about the cell and stopped on the tensely crouched figure of the flyer.

"Here you are. I brought you some rations, a book or two and a light. There's a shelf here. I'll push them in and—"

"You blasted traitor! What do you mean? Rations and a book be damned. Where's your right to throw me in a hole like this? You let me out of here or by God—"

"Better take 'em, Fogarty." Donlin's icy voice broke through the tirade. "I told you that you were taking the rest. You are."

Fogarty lunged against the door and Donlin stepped back. His voice was unruffled. "I'm losing sleep to bring you these things. Better take them. If you don't, you'll be sorry."

Fogarty's muscles tensed and his voice was a blast. In lurid syllables he expressed his opinion of rations and books and flashlights, of the flying service and of Steve Donlin. The squadron leader heard him through; then he spoke again.

"I'm leaving in thirty seconds. There's one drink of whisky there and—"

"Whisky!" Fogarty stiffened and every nerve in his body tingled. He hadn't expected that. A drink! Even the rats would lose their power to terrify if he could get a drink. Just one.

"Time's up." Donlin's icy voice brought him out of himself and the shutter moved. Fogarty leaped forward.

"No. It's all right. Give me the stuff. Quick. For God's sake."

"The food first." Donlin was still coolly detached. Fogarty grabbed the tray and slid it through the aperture beneath the bars. His fingers were trembling. Donlin shot the beam across the cell. "Set that food on the bench, Fogarty."

Meekly and with that strange quiver running

through him, Fogarty crossed the cell. He was back again in a flash and Donlin passed him the books, then the light. Fogarty dumped them in unceremonious haste. The man in the corridor was maddeningly slow.

At last it came. One slug in the bottom of a tall glass. Fogarty almost cried with the relief of it. His hands shook and he gripped the glass as though it were the last thing between him and the pit. Donlin shook his head and tugged at the shutter.

"Good night," he said softly. Fogarty didn't hear him. Liquid fire was pouring down his throat and the life was coming back to his chilled blood. King Alcohol was a benign monarch and what price pride now?

The rats made a clean sweep of his food before he thought of it, but the bottle of water was safe. He didn't care. Food didn't make much difference.

The morning was hard. Fogarty's head had cleared now and the devils of desire were tearing at him. He was accustomed to starting the day with liquor and he counted that day lost which didn't start that way. He raged and thundered and amused himself by hurling the books against the wall.

About noon, Donlin opened the panel. Fogarty came to his feet with an oath. Donlin tossed him a package of sandwiches. "Can't stay and argue, Jim. See you later."

THE shutter clicked and Fogarty looked down at the package of sandwiches. Food! What he wanted was drink. With a crackling oath, he hurled the package from him. It hit the wall and dropped.

There was a slithering, padding sound and the rats charged. With sharp fangs they tore at the wrappings and Fogarty wheeled toward them, his lips curling back from his teeth. That was his grub they were taking. His!

The wind whistled through his teeth and his hand flashed to his hip. There was a roar that brought the crashing echoes down on Fogarty's head and a ripping big slug smashed the biggest rat against the wall. With a snarl, Fogarty leaped across the cell and retrieved his package.

"Fight anything on two legs or four for what's mine. That's me, Fogarty." His voice sounded harsh and cracked to his own ears and he passed a hand across his face. "What I need is a drink," he muttered brokenly. "One little drink."

His eyes wandered across the cell and he straightened with a shudder. A veritable army of rats had gathered there in the corner and they were fast devouring the one he had killed. Something

cold passed through him and his scalp tingled. He touched his gun again and the touch steadied him. His thoughts turned to Donlin, Donlin who had caged him up in this place of horror.

"He didn't take my gun," he said wonderingly. "He forgot." For a grim second, he considered turning the weapon on himself, then he straightened. There was strong stuff in Fogarty, too strong for that kind of a finale. His eyes narrowed.

"To-night," he whispered hoarsely, "I'll blow him to hell like I did the rat." He rocked back and forth on the bench, his knees clutched in his hands and a mirthless chuckle cackling from his lips. "He's a rat himself. Claims to be my friend. I'll fix him. Blow him to pieces like a rat." His chuckle rose weirdly. "Maybe the rats will eat him. What a joke! Donlin, the Hun killer, eaten by rats!"

For a long time he rocked thus and then he lay down, moving only when the rats strove to take the food that he clutched against his breast. Fever racked him and he was in a wild delirium through which he listened to long arguments between two sides of his nature.

"You're going crazy, Fogarty," one voice said. "You can't kill Donlin. He is your friend. He's trying to straighten you up. It's your fault. You lost four men."

Through the argument sounded that other voice that came from deep in his body, the cry of an appetite that was stronger than the man. "If only I had a drink; one little drink."

In rational moments, he played a little game with himself and tried to tell time by the changing light through the high chink in the wall. Finally the light vanished and he knew that it was night. He sat in the corner then and kicked at the rats as they charged in. He pretended that the rats were von Sternberg and his squadron. He amused himself by scattering them and gained strength from the idea.

After long hours there came a sound once more from the corridor. Fogarty rose as silently as an Indian and slid his right hand down his hip.

Donlin would open that grille in a minute. Donlin would stand outside and call to him. Donlin would have his head in that little square and it would be an easy shot.

His hand trembled and he cursed it irritably. It mustn't tremble. Not now. He raised his left hand to steady the weapon, but the left was shaking as though he had palsy. He sank back and steadied the left on his knee; aiming the pistol over the fork made by thumb

and forefinger. One shot. He wouldn't have time for any more than that. One shot had to do the work.

CHAPTER VII WORDS

THE SHUTTER CLICKED and Fogarty's finger tightened. The little window moved back and a faint odor seemed to seep through from the corridor. Maybe it was a memory from the night before, maybe it was desire. Fogarty's hand dropped.

"Whisky!" he muttered. "My God! One little drink. If he has it and I shoot him—"

The thought agonized him. He pictured the liquor running in a stream down the corridor where he couldn't reach it. He pictured the rats Tuning through it and he whistled through his teeth. He'd shoot them. He'd shoot every rat in France.

"Fogarty! I brought you your food."

The cold voice came from behind the grille and Fogarty stumbled forward. "A drink!" he muttered. "You brought a drink?"

Behind his back, he clutched the gun. If Donlin had failed him! The squadron commander nodded.

"Yes! Less to-night than last night. I'm not brute enough to stop you all at once."

"Give it to me!"

"Wait a minute. The other things first."

As he had done on the preceding night, Fogarty took the other things with feverish haste. The things he had planned to say to Donlin were forgotten and he did not even care if Donlin planned ever to let him out. He wanted that drink. Nothing else mattered.

Like a desert-stricken traveler at the first oasis, he leaped to the drink when he got it. For a long minute, Donlin stood against the bars. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, then he shook his head and the door clicked.

Fogarty didn't even hear him go. Three days and nights went by, horrible days and nights for Fogarty. His liquor supply was less each night, but he was needing it less. His nerves felt like snake legions parading under his skin, but his mind was clear. No longer did he go into futile spasms of rage. The fierce blaze of anger had died in him and left only a cold and deadly hate.

There was no delirium now and he shuddered as he thought of how close he had come to killing Donlin in that corridor. With Donlin dead outside there, he would be hopelessly cooped up. No one came down to these levels and the chances were that the flight would never find him. He'd be cooped up there until his strength left him and the rats got bolder. He didn't like to think of the finish, then.

What if Donlin was killed in the air? He brushed the thought away. He had to get out. His position held too many hazards. Besides it was maddening, humiliating, horrible. He had to get out and when he got out, he was going to kill Steve Donlin.

There was no emotion about that; it was a cold, deadly resolve. Fogarty, who had been a wild, raging animal of a man a few days before, had become now a craftily scheming creature animated by a grim resolve. With methodical thoroughness, Fogarty tested every inch of the door and considered the means at his disposal for forcing it. It was a hopeless job. His eyes ranged the walls and rested on that chink through which the light poured. A possibility.

Upending the bench against the wall, he backed the length of the cell. His palms were moist but he tensed himself, first discarding every surplus bit of clothing and placing the gun on top of the pile. A short run and then he leaped.

His feet barely touched the top of the upended bench; just enough to give him an added spring. His fingers clutched at the cruel edge of rock and his muscles bunched. He went up.

FOR a precarious moment Fogarty hung there while the Fates decided whether to let him win, or drop him back to the floor of the cell. His breath sang through his teeth in a thin whisper and he exerted a last bit of drive. Now.

He was up and wiggling into the chink, the tight wedging of his body giving rest to his muscles. Pale sunlight streamed over him and the shadow of three bars fell across his body. He cursed. It would be barred, of course.

For an instant, he considered the expedient of hanging there and yelling, or dropping down for his gun and coming back. Maybe he could summon somebody if he fired a shot. The thought perished with its birth. He grimaced with distaste. He was Fogarty and he was going to get out of any jam he got into without calling for help.

His body was a tight fit, but he wiggled until

his fingers clutched the bars. He shook them and a thrill of hope ran through his body. They were still formidable obstacles, but he could move them a little. Age and the terrible concussion of distant shells had probably conspired to weaken their hold. A strong man with patience might do much to further the process.

For hours he worked silently and grimly; then he slipped back and dropped down to his prison. There was a smile playing about his lips now and his nerves were steady. He had something to work for.

When Donlin came that night, Fogarty met him quietly. He had nothing to say. His time was coming and when he talked to Donlin it would be as man to man and not as prisoner to jailer. The squadron commander passed the food in silently; then he hesitated and his voice, when it came, had a sharp snap to it.

"No liquor to-night, Jim. That bottle you had is all gone and time's up on that anyway. I gave you what I did as a physical precaution."

"Yes." Fogarty's eyes shot hatred at the man whom he had called friend. "Just keeping me on the right side of sanity, huh? Never stopped to figure what would happen to me if a Jerry got you. Or did you take the entire mess in on your little game?"

The last question was sharp, challenging. Donlin waved his hand. "You know I didn't. I should have told you. There's a letter on the top of my stuff. Tells Cochrane about it if I smoke out. I protected you there."

"I should be grateful, I suppose. Kind of you. Well, you can go to hell."

Fogarty wheeled and crossed to the bench. For a full minute, Donlin stayed at the door; then he snapped it shut and the corridor swallowed him.

Fogarty gave him time to get back to quarters and time to spare. Then, with feverish anxiety, he mounted once more to the niche and set to work. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and blinded him; his hands were raw and his whole body ached—but he hummed softly. Little by little the bars were loosening up. Freedom waited for him behind those bars; freedom and vengeance. And the greater of these was vengeance!

The morning sun was cleaving the clouds when the last bar gave. With a weary sigh, Fogarty stretched full length with his head through the opening and breathed content. It was good just to have his head cut in the open once more. Terribly good.

The distant booming did not seem so distant out here and there was a sharp, shrieking note that had not been there when Fogarty last breathed the sun-drenched air. His brow furrowed. A push, probably. For the first time since his imprisonment he thought about the war and wondered what had been doing; but only for a moment. Then the thought of his private feud came back and with it a wave of bitterness. He staggered to his feet with a curse.

THE field was strangely silent and deserted. Fogarty strode across a corner and headed for the entrance to the chateau. All the humor was gone from his face and his mouth was a straight, hard, bitter line. His hands clenched and unclenched; his eyes smoldered ominously.

The door gave under his touch and a deserted room met his gaze. He frowned and stepped in, banging the door behind him. A startled sergeant emerged from the lecture room, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Lieutenant Fogarty, sir! When did you get back? I didn’t hear any body land or—”

“Where’s Donlin?”

The blasting tone of the question forbade any wonder anent muddy uniforms or disheveled, unsoldierly appearance. Sergeant Krell blinked and swallowed.

“Aloft, sir. Everybody is. Orders. Every ship in the air, they say. Sweep the Huns out of——”

“Everybody up. Hell and damnation. All right. Clear out of here.”

With long strides, Fogarty crossed the room and swung into the sanctum sanctorum that was Donlin’s office. Purposefully he bore down on the little desk, bringing up sharp at sight of two envelopes. “Lieutenant Cochrane, in the event of my being reported missing.” and another envelope with the name concealed.

“Huh! Thought he was lying. We’ll see.”

Without hesitation, Fogarty ripped open the letter. It was brief and to the point; simple instructions for the finding of the cell in which Fogarty was imprisoned and a caution to the effect that the matter should not be discussed until after a conference with Fogarty.

“Right! That’s the least that the dirty son could do!” Fogarty wadded the note and hurled it from him. His hand closed over the other letter and his eyes narrowed as he read the inscription. “Captain Fogarty, Personal.”

In spite of himself, Fogarty’s fingers trembled. He

cursed and ripped the envelope wide. A single sheet fluttered out and Fogarty grabbed it in mid-air.

Dear Jim,

Rather rough stunt, and you’re probably cursing the ground I walked on. Too bad. Get the slant, Jim. You get this only if I go West. A dead man is privileged.

You were washed up. No two ways about it. I didn’t blame you for being trapped. All of us get trapped some time or other. Men go when it’s their turn. It was the turn of those four fellows. I didn’t charge them to your account. C’est la guerre. Enough for them. Point is, Jim, you couldn’t fight a lick any more. I saw you fight that Hun and you were terrible. The next fairly decent Hun would send you down.

We were friends, Jim. I didn’t want it to happen. I’d rather half kill you myself, than have a Jerry do the complete job.

Happy landings,

Steve.

Fogarty stood like a statue, the letter gripped in his fingers, his eyes stricken and ashamed. For a long minute he stood thus and then he cursed deep and whole-heartedly. His shoulders snapped back and he cleared the door in two strides. In the middle of the assembly room, he came to a stop. It would only take a minute to run up to his room. There was a bottle behind that loose brick.

“I need a drink.” He wet his lips and ran the back of his hand across his eyes; then he cursed again and turned on his heel. The prophetic note in that letter worried him. “You get this only if I go West.”

He remembered the tale of another Fogarty in the days when Montana was young. That Fogarty had delayed and lost a friend.

His ears interpreted the staccato bedlam out yonder now and he looked apprehensively at the clear sky. A big push. Sky full of Fokkers and Albatrosses. Every ship up and a fight to the finish. Every ship up—and his was not counted on.

He was covering the apron with great strides now and his booming voice was blasting the carbon out of a group of loafing mechanics. Every ship, they said. Right!

A MATTER of minutes and he was kicking his little Nieuport off the line, a lean, grim pilot who had no idea of where to find his flight; a man who was trusting the great red gods of War to lead him and to guide him aright.

“Only if I go West!” The phrase burned into Fogarty’s consciousness and he hit the tail of his Nieuport with full gun. The Rotary roared and beat

a song against the wind. "Find Donlin," it said. "Find Donlin. Find Donlin. Find Donlin."

Up and up and up. Seasoned old campaigner that he was, Fogarty knew that the time he spent in getting altitude was time well invested. Maneuvering the sun to his back, he ranged the lines. Three lumbering Rumplers moved in a valley of cloud and he passed them by disdainfully. Let 'em hunt.

Up to his left and miles away, he spied a group of tiny specks. Their formation habits identified them as Germans, but he paid them only casual attention. Then he found what he was seeking.

Far to the south beyond a hedge of billowy cloud was a single flight of Nieuports. Top protection group. He grunted as he registered the fact that the distant Germans had also seen them. A race, by the gods!

He wondered whether the Nieuport patrol could see the Huns and guessed that they didn't. Those clouds would be a nuisance and the Jerry flight was against the sun. At the same moment, he knew that he would not be able to reach the Nieuports in time to give the warning.

He climbed fast and then nosed forward. He wouldn't get there first but he'd get there on top of the blighters. Bet a quart of the finest! He licked his lips and pushed the stick forward.

There was something singing in his blood as the music of the wires ran the scales. He thought that only rooks felt stimulated and eager for fight. He had almost forgotten. War had been just a business for a long time now.

The Germans flashed down, swift arrows of destruction. Fogarty grunted. Albatrosses! The fingers of fear clutched at him but he shook them off. "Donlin!"

Too late the Nieuports saw their foes. The Germans were pulling on them with their guns blazing; that remarkable dive and hit trick of the Albatross. Fogarty smiled grimly and then he was in it.

His nose was hell bent for the leading Albatross and his fingers caressed the trips. A flash in the sights and he poured his slugs. The German literally blew up in his face, a stricken ship that had no reprieve from that quick blast of death. Fogarty knew a moment of wild unbelief. He had destroyed an Albatross. Pulling up on his tail, he sprayed another as it swept across him; then he zoomed up in the beginning of a loop.

At the very top he half rolled and, still upside down, dropped his nose and dived. Down in a U and back in a zoom that knocked a third Albatross right off the tail of an embattled Nieuport. Fogarty laughed aloud.

God, this was great! His muscles told him that they were weary and he laughed at them. His mind was clear and he could see things happening a half a minute before they happened. Insight.

"Donlin was okay." He banked sharply and his tracers bit a wing, just missing a cockpit. "My carcass has been kidding me. Old carcass wanted booze. It wanted to quit and lie down. The bean didn't. Been giving my carcass the breaks and giving the bean a raw deal. Huh! After this, the bean gets a break."

CHAPTER VIII PUNCH-DRUNK PROD

HE WHIRLED AROUND with a desperate little scout and maneuvered carefully for position. He felt invincible. "Carcass thinks it does the flying. Hell's belfry! The bean does it. Carcass takes orders."

He got his man in the sights and bore down. The Vickers popped sickeningly and was silent. Fogarty cursed. A jam. Rolling out of the way of the scared Albatross pilot. Fogarty dropped down and hammered at the crank handle. It wouldn't budge and he blasted it with a withering stream of language. He needed every second now and the sky was full of death. He hadn't found Donlin and what could he do for Donlin without a gun?

He cast a wary eye toward his late antagonist. The fellow had enough and was hitting it away. *Deo gratias!* The fight had swung over fifteen or twenty miles of sky. He looked down and stiffened.

Two Albatrosses were dancing the dance of death about a single Nieuport. They were feinting it dizzy and, though the pilot was twisting and squirming, they were tightening the noose. Seconds and they'd have him. Fogarty sucked his breath in sharply. Steve Donlin!

Time stood still. Donlin was down there and needed him. Steve Donlin who'd put him on ice to save him from the Huns! Steve who'd lost sleep bringing him grub after the squad was asleep! Steve who'd violated his own principles to smuggle him whisky! Steve!

His nose was down and he was hurtling through the sky. The wires shrieked mockery.

"You have no guns. You have no guns." The song

rose in a wailing chorus and Fogarty cursed. "Guns be damned!"

Donlin missed a burst and skidded on a bank. One of the Huns darted in and Fogarty gritted his teeth. Now!

Like a comet, he swooped down and his tight fingers eased back on the stick. He was hurtling destruction and he was timing himself with mathematical precision. His nose whipped up and his undercarriage met something with a grinding, tearing, shrieking sound that rose above the clamor of the engine.

Then his nose dropped from the shock in spite of his efforts to hold it. He breathed hard and waited for the German's prop to tear through his flying wires. Nothing happened and he looked back. The German had tried to swerve and that swerve had taken his prop away, from the wounded Nieuport. Fogarty laughed.

"Tore his wings all to hell," he roared, "all to hell!"

It was true. A broken, useless thing, the Albatross was fluttering down the sky. Donlin was whirling with the other and holding his own. Steve had a chance now with only one foe. A fighting man asks no more. Still!

Fogarty wheeled to the fight once more and death raced out of the skies. Something flacked viciously into the fuselage behind the cockpit and Fogarty rolled in a flash. A grim black Albatross rushed past him and zoomed back. He had a swift vision of a hard, cold face over the cowl and his heart stopped while ice formed in his veins. Von Sternberg!

The German ace was not testing a ship now. He was on the kill and his ship was a thing alive. Fogarty pulled up, dropped off upside down, and tried to beat him to tail position. He knew it was hopeless but he tried. In that moment fear left him.

He laughed aloud at the futility of his own effort. He was trying for the tail position and what could he do with it. This German had simply walked away from his guns once before when he had tail position. Now he had no guns.

WITH the majesty of a mighty monarch, death strode across Fogarty's sights. Master of sky and sea and earth, death brooked no rival. Fear slunk off before him and left him on the stage alone. All of the terror that Fogarty had known in the memory of his terrible defeat passed, now that he had no chance.

Gunless, tired and with a damaged, inferior plane, he hurtled into the German and laughed at the flaming Spandaus. His flying was inspired; von Sternberg's

lips tightened as he fired a hasty burst that clipped through a wing and left Fogarty grinning defiantly in the cockpit.

There had been no hasty burst out of the German's gun on St. Patrick's morning and Fogarty scored that miss as another triumph in a day of triumphs. He had whipped every Albatross he had faced while he had guns; he had saved Steve Donlin and he had whipped the yellow in his own soul. One dies on the top of his loop when one has a morning like this.

Irritated, seemingly, by the miss, von Sternberg whipped around and came hurtling back. Fogarty scorned to maneuver and postpone the inevitable. His nose headed into the other and he raced him prop-on.

The combined speed of the two ships was over two hundred miles an hour and there was a horrible blur in Fogarty's eyes as he roared into that grim, contemptuous face that had haunted his days and the black hours of his nights.

The props almost touched and von Sternberg dived out. He had been bluffed down. Fogarty laughed aloud. The other had not had the nerve to keep coming. Fogarty would never have pulled out.

Like a meteor of destruction, the Albatross came back; there was no more collision fighting. With the same deft skill he had shown on the day that he broke Fogarty's heart, the German feinted and maneuvered his man into the position he wanted. Then, coolly and contemptuously, he poured his lead.

Fogarty felt his little ship reel and he rolled with the blow as a fighter rolls who takes a punch going away. Something as hard and as cold as an ice-packed snowball smashed into his shoulder and his side; the sky whirled around him and he sagged.

He came back briefly to feel his body straining against the straps as his tail whipped around in a dizzy spin. Agony wracked him and he was deathly sick, but the instinct to live and fight remained with him. His side was sticky and his arms felt like hundred pound weights, but he eased his controls to neutral, ruddered against the spin and battled to hold his thin grip on consciousness.

With a wrench that fluttered the weak wings and that sent a strip of loosened linen flapping, he came out and the earth rushed under him in a reddish-brown blur. His mind groped with a vagrant memory and his lips rolled back from his teeth in the semblance of a grin as he remembered.

"Undercarriage all smashed to hell. Washed it out on that Hun of Donlin's. Can't land anyway."

It was all so cut and dried and inevitable that there was nothing to fear. One fears only when one has a chance; he who is doomed has met the worst.

He was conscious of firing, of seamed and furrowed earth and of a broad, flat field that was pitted and marked with craters. His hand fumbled with his safety straps, he dipped one wing and then he hit.

For one wild somersaulting moment he lost consciousness and the concentrated noise of a whole war seemed to burst in his eardrums. He gave a gasp as his body hurtled through the air; there was a splash and he went under water in a giant crater filled with muddy slime.

That was nearly the end, but the instinct to live fought on and the chill of the water brought him back from the dim borderland of unconsciousness. He paddled a few strokes, dragged himself out and plunged full length. Through his mind passed a parade of dim impressions; one stood out and curled a smile across his bleeding face.

Von Sternberg had won again but he was not the better man. He had pulled out. "He's got the better ship. That's all he ever had."

It was a thought of exceedingly great comfort and Fogarty passed out.

WHEN Fogarty was next conscious of anything, he was being pawed and jostled. A voice, far away and faint, said something about broken ribs and a broken leg and bullet wounds. He knew that they were talking about him but he couldn't fight through the mist. A crisp voice summed up matters.

"He'll probably live but he'll take a lot of patching."

Good enough. He was going to live. He'd licked fear and he'd licked Albatrosses and he'd licked von Sternberg, even if the Hun had shot him down.

"Best in the world. Lick anybody," he muttered. He was aware of a terrible craving and he pushed against it. His carcass was clamoring for liquor again and he had decided to give the bean a break and make the carcass like it.

Agony shot through him as he was moved again and he groped again at the fog that shut out the faces of these men who were pawing him. "Bean loses," he muttered. "A carcass that is all shot to hell needs a drink."

He made a supreme effort and his voice came through. "Gimme a drink," he said hoarsely. "A stiff drink."

There was a lot of conversation and he had an idea

that there were no drinks available. He struggled to tell them about the bottle behind the brick and the effort exhausted him. The shadows closed in again.

The blackness lifted with somebody's arm behind his shoulders and a whiff of peculiar potency in his nostrils. He opened his eyes. Steve Donlin was bending over him and Steve was holding liquor to his lips. Fogarty lifted his left hand and was surprised to find it functioning. His fingers closed around the glass.

"Where'd you come from?"

There was a suspicious moisture in Steve Donlin's eyes. "I saw you get it and come down. I followed you. Crashed my landing like a rook." Donlin was embarrassed and trying to laugh it off. Fogarty was embarrassed, too.

"Rotten field," he said. "Full of holes."

He cocked an eye at the solemn group that surrounded them; artillery men. He hadn't got home. He squinted. Australians. Huh! Steve must have had a hell of a time getting an Aussie to give a man a drink. He sniffed the fragrance and lifted his glass.

"Been thinking tough things about you, Steve. Sorry as hell. You're all right. Best in the world. Ah!"

The coveted drink was almost to his lips and he stiffened. He was Fogarty and he had had a morning for the gods. He had been invincible and he had licked everything in sight. He could still lick anything that walked or flew or crawled or flowed. He frowned at the drink and then grinned into Donlin's face. He'd drink old Steve a toast he'd never forget.

"Happy Landings!"

With a careless gesture that outraged every quivering nerve in his body, Fogarty turned the glass and let the precious liquor pour slowly out upon the ground.

For a brief second his eyes held Steve Donlin's, then he cursed softly and sank back. Far off in the gray distance there was a steady booming that told the story of another conflict in another world. The guns of April were tuning up. Fogarty slept peacefully. He was invincible; not one defeat to mar a morning for the gods.